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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 000452

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TAGS: EAID MARR PREL

SUBJECT: BELGIANS TELL S/R HOLBROOKE ADDITIONAL MILITARY,
CIVILIAN HELP LIKELY ON AFGHANISTAN

REF: BRUSSELS 412 (NOTAL)

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Wayne Bush, reasons 12958

¶1. (C) Summary: If last minute intra-coalition politics do not get in the way, the Belgian government intends to announce a new support package for NATO operations in Afghanistan before the April 4 Strasbourg summit, Belgian FM De Gucht told Special Envoy Holbrooke on March 23, 2009. On the military side, the new package probably will include the extension past September of Belgium's deployment of four F-16s, the modest expansion (two additional aircraft) of the F-16 force, and a proposal to provide a C-130 in support of the upcoming Afghan national elections. A stepped up civilian effort is in the offing too. This portion of the package is going to encompass additional development assistance, and participation in PRTs and OMLTs. De Gucht's comments track with information received separately from Prime Minister Van Rompuy's office. The Minister also suggested launching an international mission to improve monitoring of Tajikistan's control of its border with Afghanistan. End summary.

¶2. (U) Special Envoy Holbrooke met for 40-minutes on March 23, 2009 with Belgian FM De Gucht and key members of his staff. U.S. Charg d'Affaires a.i. Bush also attended the meeting. Among other topics, the meeting considered the difficult choices facing policymakers on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and touched upon narcotics and Central Asia. Highlights of the meeting follow below.

Belgian Support for NATO Operations in Afghanistan

¶3. (C) The Special Envoy began the discussion by outlining the need for further support from Belgium and other allies. This need grew out of several worrisome trends in the region, notably in Pakistan, where AQ's influence was now particularly alarming. The Obama administration recognized the need to devote additional attention and resources to the region, and already had taken steps toward this end, as evidenced by the decision to send 17,000 additional troops and to do everything possible to bolster support for the upcoming elections.

¶4. (C) FM De Gucht responded positively. Citing a recent public pledge by the Prime Minister, De Gucht pledged additional "civil-military support." Although the final shape of this package would depend on intra-coalition negotiations, De Gucht said the package probably would include the following elements:

An extended deployment (past September) of Belgian AF F-16s;

An increase in the number of F-16s (from four to six), plus necessary support troops;

An offer of a C-130 in support of the election effort;

and

A bulking up of Belgian backing for PRT's and OMLTs.

Intra-coalition negotiations were underway now, but the Belgians would make a definitive announcement before the Strasbourg NATO summit, De Gucht emphasized. (Comment: See reftel for more complete list of proposals under consideration by the Belgian cabinet. End comment.)

15. (C) The Belgian government intended also to offer additional development assistance, De Gucht said. The details of this offer were not set, however, because the experts were still deciding on how to tie increased funding to feasible programs, as at the PRT's. The GOB did not want to provide new money to inefficient international organizations.

16. (C) S/R Holbrooke welcomed the minister's description of GOB thinking. He had particular praise for the possible offer of direct help for the election preparation effort. Given the scale of the undertaking, transport help was certain to be very useful.

Regional Situation

17. (C) In discussing the situation in the region, S/R Holbrooke noted that the Obama administration would press Pakistan to move more forcefully against radical Islamist groups. FM De Gucht made clear that he shared S/R Holbrooke's concern, particularly about the importance of maintaining Pakistan's stability. De Gucht said he thought the close links between the Pakistani Army, the Taliban, and other terrorist groups posed a special risk. Former Pakistani leader Musharraf did little to deal with this problem, and the current leadership will have even more trouble trying to resolve it.

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18. (C) De Gucht expressed special concern about the situation in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Belgian supplies for Afghanistan must move through both countries and, as a result, it was impossible to speak out forcefully about the human rights situation there. Because so many of the narcotics pouring into Europe came through Tajikistan, De Gucht thought it would be useful provide help in border monitoring there. This effort could occur through OSCE mechanisms.

Comment

19. (C) The Minister's detailed exposition of Belgian plans for Afghanistan is fully in keeping with what we have been hearing from other sources. His remark about the need for further intra-coalition negotiations suggests that the decision point is near. Both francophone Socialists and Christian Democrats are reluctant to back additional military aid, but unlikely to block the plan -- assuming they can extract a suitable pound of flesh from the national budget.
End comment.

Bush

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